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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000630

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/PMBS, INR/EAP, USIP-SOLOMON
NSC FOR GREEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/09/2015

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY: JOLO FIGHTING LEAVES OVER 50 DEAD

REF: A. MANILA 621

[B](#). MANILA 5943

[C](#). MANILA 5628

Classified By: Political Officer Joseph Saus
for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (U) This is a corrected copy of Manila 621. The Summary reported incorrectly that the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was involved in the recent clashes. The Summary should read that the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was involved, as is indicated below. The body of Manila 621 correctly reported the involvement of MNLF forces.

Summary

[1](#)2. (C) Scattered armed clashes between armed gunmen (a combined force of Nur Misuari loyalists, Abu Sayyaf Group, and Moro National Liberation Front fighters) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) over the past two days killed at least 30 militants and 21 government troops on Jolo Island in the southern Philippine Province of Sulu. Despite calls for calm from Sulu's governor, fighting continues in several locations on Jolo Island, with the AFP calling for troop reinforcements and utilizing air and artillery strikes against rebel formations. As many as 2,900 AFP troops are currently in Sulu Province. Given the significant losses on the military side, the AFP is determined to finish off the rebels, although such search and destroy operations rarely are successful in the thick, forested mountains of Jolo. End Summary.

State of Play

[1](#)3. (SBU) Armed clashes escalated since February 7 in several small towns on Jolo Island, resulting in significant casualties for both the AFP and a combined force of gunmen. Various press reports suggest at many as 30 gunmen and 21 government troops were killed. According to Don Loong, the provincial administrator and nephew of Governor Benjamin Loong, the provincial capital, Jolo Town, is calm. Most of the fighting is in the smaller and scattered hamlets of Parang, Panamao, Patikul, and Maimbung. (Note: Sulu Province consists of several islands, Jolo being the largest. The province is about 590 miles south of Manila. End Note.)

[1](#)3. (C) Media reports and Embassy contacts assert that loyalists of Nur Misuari -- known as the Misuari Renegade Group (MRG) -- undertook the offensive to gain his release. (Note: Nur Misuari is the former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leader and Governor of the Autonomous Region In Muslim Mindanao. He is in detention near Manila awaiting trial for inciting his followers to attack Jolo Town in 2001 leaving over 100 soldiers, rebels, and locals dead. End Note.) Don Loong provided Poloff further context February 8, stating the incident grew from an AFP operation last week to confiscate firearms at a house between Parang and Maimbung. An ensuing firefight (cause unknown) left the home owner, his wife, and daughter dead. Loong said the death of the woman and child infuriated locals in Sulu and brought several armed rebel elements together in a loosely-banded-together tactical alliance. According to military contacts, on February 7, 500 members of the MRG, the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group, and MNLF remnants attacked units of the 35th Infantry Battalion near Panamao, and later attacked a reinforcing platoon near Patikul.

GRP Downplaying The Damage

[1](#)4. (C) At a February 9 meeting with President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo, and visiting Commander, US Pacific Command ADM Thomas Fargo, AFP Chief General Efren Abu told POLCOUNS the operations in Jolo are going smoothly. President Arroyo considered the incident a marginal issue, providing the AFP an opportunity to further degrade the MRG and ASG.

What,s Next

15. (SBU) Lt. Gen. Alberto Braganza, Chief of AFP Southern Command, ordered artillery and air strikes on February 8 using OV-10s and MG-520 helicopter gunships against enemy units. As of February 8, a Marine Battalion Landing Team (300-600 troops) was enroute to Jolo Island from Zamboanga City. According to military contacts there are two Army Battalions and two Marine Battalions, totaling around 2,900 troops, currently deployed to Sulu Province. Governor Loong is working to maintain calm and provide for civilians displaced by the fighting. On February 9, he convened the Provincial Peace and Order Council with the mayor of Jolo and other affected towns to discuss the prospects of an immediate, mutual cease-fire. (Note: Once AFP reinforcements arrive, the pitched gun battles in semi-populated areas will likely end, allowing the AFP to bombard suspected enemy positions or pursue enemy forces with ground units. End Note.)

Comment: Mountain Fighting A Tough Slog

16. (C) The AFP lost a sizeable number of troops in these incidents. Braganza commented publicly, &They (the militants) have asked for it and we,ll give it to them,8 indicating his serious intent to pursue them. The militants, taking advantage of their familiarity with the local terrain, have a well-developed track record of successfully evading AFP pursuit and bombing operations. We do not expect Braganza,s pursuit of around &500 armed men holding out in the mountains8 will end either quickly or cleanly. End Comment.
Ricciardone